Othello and the Power of Language

Introduction
Despite the truth of Iago's confession to Rodrigo that he is not what he appears to be, his gullible sidekick continues to trust this two-faced "confidante" who swears "by Janus," and who sows doubt, destruction and despair in the paths of all he encounters. How? How is Iago able to convince one and all that he is, as he is constantly called, "honest Iago"?

Much of the answer must lie in Iago's skillful manipulation of rhetorical skills. A puppeteer of the psyche, Iago pulls the strings of those who should know better with a battery of verbal weapons. In his soliloquies and dialogues he reveals himself to the audience to be a master of connotative and metaphorical language, inflammatory imagery, emotional appeals, well-placed silences, dubious hesitations, leading questions, meaningful repetition, and sly hints. Indeed, Iago is so good at lying that he is able to convince even himself that he has the soundest of reasons to destroy Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio.

Iago's convincing rhetoric clearly reveals what a powerful-and dangerous-tool language can be, especially when used by the eloquent, but unscrupulous, individual. We will be exploring the basis of Iago's persuasive power by analyzing his astonishing command of rhetoric and figurative language.

Guiding Questions
How does Iago use language to deceive others?
How does Iago convince Othello that Cassio is a drunk, disloyal soldier, or that Desdemona is a cunning whore?
Why does Iago use his rhetoric and acting skills to destroy others?
What drives him?
Who and what is Iago?

Learning Objectives
• Read closely and analyze Iago's rhetoric in specific monologues and dialogues with other characters
• Study what Iago says (his word choice) and how he says it (his superb acting), as well as what he refrains from saying (the silence that spurs his listeners on to imagining the worst or to realizing the worst about themselves)
• Learn some basic rhetorical terms
• Discover the sometimes dangerous power of language

Resources
Website- Silva Rhetoricae: The Forest of Rhetoric  http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm

-Use it to become familiar with the following terms: appeals to reason, emotions, and character (logos, pathos, ethos), metaphor, intimation, repetition (of specific words and ideas)
Other terms, not mentioned on this website but also useful for the study of Othello, include image, connotative language, and leading questions.

Context to Understand
• Othello as a stranger in a strange land: In order to understand how and why Iago's rhetoric might work so effectively against Othello, you should be aware of the powerful general's vulnerability: he is a Moor in an alien society, first in the city of Venice and then on the isle of Cyprus. In short, Othello is an "other," and the fact that he is a Moor surrounded by Italians and Cypriots only emphasizes his difference.
  • Read the following article:
Scholars disagree as to when Shakespeare finished writing Othello, but we can date the play from its first performance by the King’s Men on November 1, 1604, at the court of James I. Multiple productions followed at the Globe and Blackfriars theatres, and the play was mounted at court again in 1612–1613 in honor of Princess Elizabeth’s wedding. Shakespeare’s principal source for the plot was a short story by the Italian writer Cinthio Giambattista Giraldi (1504-1574), who included it in a collection of 100 domestic stories titled Hecatomithi, published in Venice in 1566. No English translation is believed to have existed before 1753, so Shakespeare may have read it in either the original Italian or in a French translation published in 1584. A handful of lines from Shakespeare’s text recall phrases from the Italian and French versions, suggesting that he may have read it in both languages.

The plot of Cinthio’s story centers on four characters, all of whom Shakespeare borrowed for his tragedy: the Moor, the Ensign, the Captain and the Moor’s wife, Desdemona. The events and key players are similar, but important differences emerge with respect to the characters’ actions and each author’s intent. Cinthio’s Moor reflects certain racial stereotypes of the day, such as a proclivity toward jealousy and passion, whereas Shakespeare takes pains to establish Othello’s heroic qualities alongside his blind spots. Desdemona offers a moral later in the original story, urging Italian women to obey their parents when they forbid them to marry foreigners. In Shakespeare’s telling, however, Desdemona takes no such stand, opting not to implicate Othello, even when Emilia asks her dying mistress, “O, who has done this deed?” Cinthio’s Ensign and Moor conspire to kill Desdemona, while Shakespeare assigns the murderous act to Othello alone. Cinthio’s Moor refuses to confess his guilt, but in Shakespeare’s version, Othello earns his place as a tragic hero by recognizing his tragic mistake and atoning for it magnificently.

Early 17th-century English attitudes toward non-Europeans were largely shaped by the government’s diplomatic policies and, to a lesser extent, by exotic stories brought back by travelers overseas. The term “moor” was derived from the name of the country Mauritania but was used to refer to North Africans, West Africans or, even more loosely, for non-whites or Muslims of any origin. North and West Africans living in Elizabethan England were frequently singled out for their unusual dress, behavior and customs and were commonly referred to as “devils” or “villains.” Moors were commonly stereotyped as sexually overactive, prone to jealousy and generally wicked. The public associated “blackness” with moral corruption, citing examples from Christian theology to support the view that whiteness was the sign of purity, just as blackness indicated sin.

Although Queen Elizabeth granted the Moors “full diplomatic recognition” out of gratitude for their help in conquering Spain, in 1601 she deported them, citing concerns about their irregular behavior and a fear that allowing them to stay in England would lead to overpopulation. Blacks were not typically associated with slavery at that time, since the slave trade would not be fully established until the late 17th century. Instead, the Elizabethan portrait of the dark-skinned “other” clearly established him as a bestial force, dangerous because of his sexuality, temper and magical powers.

In his adaptation, Shakespeare incorporates these racial stereotypes into the dialogue, assigning them to characters like Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio at the top of the play. Their slurs and accusations provide the backdrop against which viewers must formulate impressions of a man they do not know. Once Othello enters, however, the audience must judge him—his calculated actions and eloquent speech—not in the abstract, but in person. Through the theatrical medium, Shakespeare helps the public see his protagonist in three dimensions: the Moor from Cinthio’s story transformed from an exotic and passionate stereotype into a tragic figure in flesh and blood. The play’s action reveals the depth of affection shared by Othello and Desdemona, the enchanting power of the general’s poetry and, finally, Iago’s easy manipulations of collegial and marital trust. Through the treachery of a surprising white devil, Shakespeare challenges his audiences to spot the true color of villainy.

Some scholars have speculated that Shakespeare wrote Othello to please James I, who had a keen interest in the history of the Turks and their defeat by the Christians in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. In assigning Othello,
the Christian general, the role of defending Cyprus against the Turks, Shakespeare gives a nod to recent military history but also signals to the Elizabethans that his hero is a “civilized” (non-Muslim) African and, therefore, worthy of their empathy.

As the setting for the original story (and substitute for Shakespeare's London), Venice provides a natural environment for the figure of the Moor to be both revered and despised. According to Venetian law, the Venetian Republic's army general was required to be a foreigner. Since Shakespeare's Venetians reflect the mores of English society, it follows that Venetian society would admire Othello for his valor and leadership but still recoil at the notion of his marrying into its families. Shakespeare chose the same city for another of his most famous portraits of otherness, The Merchant of Venice (1596–1597), challenging his audiences to consider “Hath not a Jew eyes? ...” In both plays, Shakespeare calls on his audiences to consider the person before them, complex as he may be, rather than judging him by inherited assumptions used to dismiss a maligned people in the abstract. Shakespeare makes the stage a venue for closer examination, a place where audiences may begin to relate to “others,” not all at once, but one extraordinary example at a time. In adapting Cinthio, Shakespeare sets up familiar stereotypes to explode them and to teach his audiences compassion for those whom society uses but never fully embraces as countrymen.

- The Roman God, Janus: (from Encyclopedia Mythica)- Janus is the Roman god of gates and doors (ianua), beginnings and endings, and hence represented with a double-faced head, each looking in opposite directions. He was worshipped at the beginning of the harvest time, planting, marriage, birth, and other types of beginnings, especially the beginnings of important events in a person's life. Janus also represents the transition between primitive life and civilization, between the countryside and the city, peace and war, and the growing-up of young people. One tradition states that he came from Thessaly and that he was welcomed by Cameus in Latium, where they shared a kingdom. They married and had several children, among which the river god Tiberinus (after whom the river Tiber is named). When his wife died, Janus became the sole ruler of Latium. He sheltered Saturn when he was fleeing from Jupiter. Janus, as the first king of Latium, brought the people a time of peace and welfare; the Golden Age. He introduced money, cultivation of the fields, and the laws. After his death he was deified and became the protector of Rome. When Romulus and his associates stole the Sabine Virgins, the Sabines attacked the city. The daughter of one of the guards on the Capitolian Hill betrayed her fellow countrymen and guided the enemy into the city. They attempted to climb the hill but Janus made a hot spring erupt from the ground, and the would-be attackers fled from the city. Ever since, the gates of his temple were kept open in times of war so the god would be ready to intervene when necessary. In times of peace the gates were closed.

His most famous sanctuary was a portal on the Forum Romanum through which the Roman legionaries went to war. He also had a temple on the Forum Olitorium, and in the first century another temple was built on the Forum of Nerva. This one had four portals, called Janus Quadrifons. When Rome became a republic, only one of the royal functions survived, namely that of rex sacrorum or rex sacrificulus. His priests regularly sacrificed to him. The month of January (the eleventh Roman month) is named after him. Janus was represented with two faces, originally one face was bearded while the other was not (probably a symbol of the sun and the moon). Later both faces were bearded. In his right hand he holds a key. The double-faced head appears on many Roman coins, and around the 2nd century BCE even with four faces.
Activity 1: Act I, scene 1
Reread the first scene of the play and as you do so, list the various rhetorical strategies that Iago uses to describe Othello and Desdemona.

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<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Line Numbers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Images of Othello and Desdemona</td>
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<td>Metaphors</td>
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<td>Appeals to Pathos</td>
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<td>Appeals to Logos</td>
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<td>Appeals to Ethos</td>
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Thought Nuggets: What makes these so offensive, especially to the father of the daughter being described? Why doesn’t Iago just say, "Desdemona has married the noble general, Othello"? Furthermore, how does Iago characterize Desdemona's and Othello’s relationship? Through his eyes, is their relationship one of love or lust? And how would this point of view affect Brabantio, a proud father of a much-cherished daughter? Does Iago use appeals of pathos, ethos, or logos? Which lines show these appeals? What psychological effects do Iago’s words have on Brabantio?
Activity 2: Act 1, Scene 1
Examine Iago’s speech to Roderigo (1.1. 41–65) for what he says about himself and how he describes himself. Translate and rewrite what Iago says into modern English. (In case your lines are different, this begins with “Why, there’s no remedy” and ends with “I am not what I am.”)
Examine and write down Iago’s reasons for wishing to appear false to Othello (see especially Act 1 scene 1 lines 8–33; Act 1 Scene 3 lines 368–386; and Act 2 scene 1 lines 268–294). What are the reasons? Is there any evidence for these reasons? If not, how does Iago use words to convince himself that he is completely justified in destroying Othello? That is, does Iago use any rhetorical devices to convince himself that he is in the right?

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Activity 3. Act 1, scene 3, lines 381–82 "The Moor is of a free and open nature, / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so."

The characters in the play refer to Iago as “honest”. What does it mean today when we say “honest”? Think of all the connotations.

Consult the website Lexicons of Early Modern English Database (LEME) http://leme.library.utoronto.ca/

What did it mean to be “honest” in Shakespeare’s time? Hint: there may have been different meaning for a man and for a woman. Record your findings below.
Using the same website from above, look up the definitions of the following: “jealousy”, “cuckold”, and “monster”. How prevalent are these words in the play? How do these words affect a man such as Othello? Does Iago use other words that would also alarm him?

Keep a running count of the number of times Iago uses repetition, leading questions, hesitation, intimation, and rhetorical appeals to unsettle Othello's mind in 3.3.93–280. For each device, students should note the effect it is having on Othello's state of mind.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Appeals</th>
<th>Line #s</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pathos</td>
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<tr>
<th>Act III, 3, lines 338-480</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Othello's State of Mind</strong></td>
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<td>Othello is rational</td>
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<td>Othello begins to doubt</td>
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<td>Othello is a jealous monster</td>
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<td>Iago’s rhetorical devices used to manipulate and persuade Othello:</td>
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<th>Act IV, 1, lines 19-45</th>
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<td>Iago’s hypothetical situations between Desdemona and Cassio</td>
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<td>Effect of these hypothetical situations on Othello</td>
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Activity 6. Act V, scene 2, line 300: "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know" Act V, scene 2, line 337–338: "When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,/ Speak of me as I am" (V, 2,) Act V, scene 2, lines 296–301 and 334–352

At the end of the play Iago discovers that even his verbal sparring cannot save him, he resorts to silence: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word" (V, 2, 302–303). Ironically, it is his refusal to speak that inevitably enmeshes him in his own web of deceit; it is his silence that elicits Othello's tragic recognition of his crime and of what he has become. Indeed, in terms of eloquence, Othello—not Iago—has the final word.

Reread the passages cited above. Why does Iago choose silence in lines 296–301? Does Othello's final speech redeem him? Examine the speech for the metaphors and images he uses. To what extent has Othello become a tragic hero? Record your analysis of these questions below.

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